

Daughter of Norma Hertzog, describes her mom in a letter to the Costa Mesa community

Norma Hertzog, the City of Costa Mesa's first woman Council Member and Mayor, passed away on Aug. 21 at the age of 94. Her daughter, Elaine Burkert, wanted the residents of Costa Mesa to know more about her mom's story. Here is her account below:

Dear Residents of Costa Mesa

What is the "inside story" of Norma Hertzog Wagner that adds to her already inspirational legacy of 94 years?

What led her to shatter glass ceilings as the first female councilwoman and mayor of Costa Mesa? What gave her, a high school dropout, the business acumen to operate two pre-schools? What led her to be a community visionary who helped to make Costa Mesa a destination and wonderful place to raise a family? Was it nature or nurture? As one of her four kids, I'd say both.

Her dad was very smart, a talented musician, and clever with his hands. Her mom was not an intellect. Her strength was her Christian faith, sense of justice, and perseverance. She stopped a ring of counter fitters, successfully sought a private audience with the President of Mexico, spoke out at church that was exhibiting racism, and raised three children as a divorcee.

Mom's family moved from Canada to Mexico during her 3rd and 4th grade years. She said, "I didn't learn much because my parents couldn't afford to send us to private schools." Upon returning to Canada, her 5th grade teacher said to her, "You're sweet but stupid." Mom disagreed with being stupid.

She completed eighth grade.



She was elected president of the local Red Cross club at 11 years old. She said, "I knew that I couldn't be a secretary or treasurer because of my lack of skills. I DID know that I could organize people!" Her organizational skills continued with the local YWCA where she was instrumental in leading events involving an average of 1,500 youth a night!

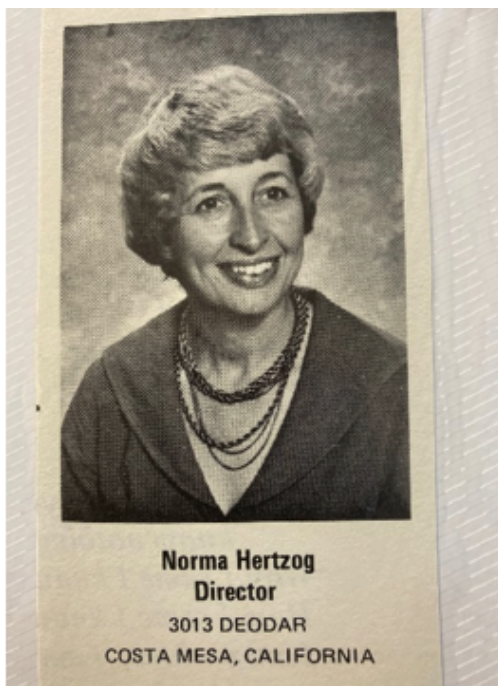
Her next great adventure (one of her favorite phrases) was to be the first female on a weekly radio show. She was only 16 years at the time. One of her mentors – who knew she didn't have a "dad" in her life, gave her a subscription to Time Magazine which helped with her education. Mom rarely wasted opportunities to keep learning.

Seeking a vocation, mom met with a highly credentialed university professor who suggested she "sweep the floors at Woolworths after hours." Her response? "That's just one person's opinion and they're wrong!" She chose to work with preschooler's because "they don't care if I have a degree; but

how I feel about them.”

She was hired at a nursery school where her employer noticed her tremendous work ethic and arranged to pay for one semester of university education. Eventually she left Canada for California and worked with children of movie stars. She continued learning at California universities but never obtained a degree beyond eighth grade.

Mom was a risk-taker. She opened Mesa Verde Preschool in 1962 and not long after West Bay Preschool. With both, she overcame significant challenges due to her lack of formal education and available finances. She never advertised yet both schools always had a waiting list. I recall so many stories of children who benefited from her programs. For example, an 18 year old stopped by Mesa Verde one day to speak with her. He said, “I just want you to know that the three years I spent here were the best of my life.” He came from a very dysfunctional family.



Mom believed the Lord never asked her to do anything without providing the needed resources. Oh, if only I had time and space to share more stories with you as readers!

In 1973, two professional campaign managers learned that she was a “first-timer” running for city council. They offered to help. She won the campaign and glass ceilings kept breaking.

Costa Mesa now has strong female leadership at all levels and has had several female mayors. Serving Costa Mesa has been the most significant aspect of her life. Even in her last months, she would chat with her friend and former mayor Mary Hornbuckle about Costa Mesa. She watched the ribbon cutting for the “Norma Hertzog Community Center” during a stay in the hospital and that gave her a much-needed boost!

My mom was guided by her faith in God, a strong and creative mind, a clear sense of justice, and a VERY wacky sense of humor that carried her through her battle with breast cancer and other challenges.



As her earthly life came to an end, her greatest joy came from knowing that she had made a difference – or was making a difference – in the lives of people around her. She often made the nursing staff laugh with her funny faces and expressions.

Mom’s life had to be purposeful. She never sat still because

there was always a new “great adventure” that God was calling her to undertake. I pray that her life continues to inspire others to achieve their God-given dreams! I’m grateful to have been one of her children.

Warmly,

Elaine Burkert (nee Wing, Hertzog)